Message 14:
From mkapor Sun Mar 11 12:08:18 1990
Date: Sun, 11 Mar 90 12:08:12 pst
From: mkapor (Mitchell Kapor)
To: jimrutt, kk, sbb, tiffy, whofan
Subject: Conference Design Meeting

I'm sending this to people I know are supposed to be coming. Tiffy, if you could send me the rest of the list I will email this to them as well.

This is my shot at an opener for the conference design meeting.

We are a diverse group which shares a common interest in improving conferencing software - and a shared propensity to act as well as talk.

The sponsor of this meeting, the Point Foundation, is well-known for its unconventional, creative role in catalyzing new media from the Whole Earth Catalog to the Well itself. We have among us tremendous experience as users, designers and architects of computer conferencing systems.

I see us as an ad hoc brainstorming and problem solving group to frame questions, articulate goals, identify alternatives, and begin to grapple with trade-offs to take the next step in computer conferencing.

What do we want? How might we get it? These strike me as the two questions from which to begin. Here are one person's thoughts.

What do we want?

As a designer, I might ask the question - what's our design center? Are we simply trying to improve Picospan? To make it easier to use? To add new features? Is it enough to add a humane PC-based front end to Picospan, something which is repeatedly requested and seems an obvious no-brainer, or is there a reason to tinker with the back end model of conferences, topics, and messages. Various proposals to this effect float around the Well from time to time.

Brief digression. I find it helpful to think of Picospan as having a "front end" and a "back end". I'm trying to make a useful conceptual distinction, first, and then worry about the degree to which it accurately characterizes the current implementation. My mental model says that the back end consists of the conferences, topics, and messages - both content and structure - and the front end is whatever user interface is employed to get at the information. Some suggestions could be implemented without touching the back end, but merely by changing the user interface, while others require redoing the back end, which is an entirely different proposition.

Are we purposely limiting our thinking to the design of a single conferencing system? What about inter-operability with other conferencing systems for purposes of sharing information? What about using and/or helping the drive the creation of information publishing standards for on-line systems, e.g., Usenet format (I think it's called RFC 1036). There might be broader, long-term advantages to this that wouldn't have any immediate benefit to the Well.

Is there interest in trying to create a distributed architecture for conferencing which would allow multiple regional systems like the Well to operate autonomously but with unlimited capacity for exchange, if desired.

What about a system which brought the PC into play as more than a front-end. Allow each user to have their own mini-Well archives on their own machine with a consistent set of commands. What about a conferencing system with more agency - for filtering, for intelligent automated browsing ("here I found something interesting for you").

Or are we trying to do more - go all the way to create a whole new model for computer conferencing? Picospan and its cousins facilitate the conversations of a virtual community and so serve as a media of communication. But have you ever tried to locate a something you once read? It is here the inadequacies of conferencing as an information medium become overwhelming. What would it mean to create a single system which served both the needs of communicating with each other and of being a useful reference tool.

What about creating an experimental test bed for a new economics of information? It has been suggested elsewhere (literature on agoric systems) that one way to provide economic incentives for high-quality content on on-line systems is to compensate individual writers based on their readership. In other words, if lots of people read your postings, you not only don't have to pay to use the system, you could make money.

I'm not talking about this instead of the Well, but in addition (sort of like basic and premium cable services). This would not only apply to writers but also "editors" - those whose value-added is in the filtering and synthesis of information. OK, this is pretty far-fetched, but should it be dismissed out-of-hand?

If it comes to building a system, do we try to build a conferencing bread board which will allow rapid prototyping and experimentation of different models, or do we try to build Well 2.0. Or both?

How do we get it? How do we sort out what we really want out of all of the above? What other work is currently going on that might address some of these needs? What are the opportunities for fund-raising to underwrite design, prototyping, or implementation of some of the above? Are there opportunities for commercial alliances? Who is prepared to participate, and in what ongoing capacity, to help get this started?